

*Gigawaabamin*

In the Ojibwe cultural, and in my personal beliefs, we are all spirits having a human experience. When our body dies our spirit travels four days and four nights to a place called “happy hunting ground” or “place of everlasting happiness”. It is said when our relatives or loved ones travel to this place, they leave a trail, so we can follow them when our experience is done. This trail can be seen in the night sky and is known as the Milky Way galaxy. This story is about the tragic death of my dear friend Sace who drowned in Lake Superior at Stockton Island’s Julian Bay, and the feeling of loss from an Ojibwe perspective.

There are spirits everywhere. There are spirits responsible for changing the seasons. There are spirits in the woods, the water, rocks, winds, drums and sacred items – these spirits can help us, if we ask. The way we communicate with these spirits is with asemaa [pronounced: ah-say-mah], asemaa is tobacco: a sacred plant used for prayer. It was given to us so that we may ask for help and speak with the spirits when necessary. You have to be careful with what you ask from the spirits. Sometime before the events on Stockton Island we were at the headwaters of Bad River on Caroline Lake and I was teaching a group of teenagers how to respect the water. I reminded them how to offer asemaa to the spirits that live there and ask for protection and safe passage. However, this time Sace was upset and he told me with a resolute look, “I’m going to put this tobacco in the water and I’m going to ask the water spirits to take me.” I immediately scolded him, “Don’t you ever say that. Don’t you ever ask that.” I stared at him and at first, he tried to hold his determined look, but his eyes waivered and he looked away for a second. I held my stare, and he promised “I won’t do it.” We talked more later on what was going on. His girlfriend had broken-up with him and later had told him she cheated on him.

We went with an art group of about twenty people to do an art project on Stockton Island. After one of our art projects some of us decided to go swimming at the beach. It was cloudy and the waves were about three feet high. Sace was scared of the water, but he could swim. It was unusual for him to decide to go swimming that day. The kid never brought swimming clothes, in fact none of us did that day. We didn't anticipate going swimming, but the water was surprisingly warm and inviting. Sace didn't want to get indecent in front of girls by swimming in his boxers so he swam in pants, he was a gentleman like that. In fact, he would dress in a dress shirt, tie or bow-tie, a black leather coat, clean Nike high-tops, and a fedora slightly tilted to side or a snapback hat, on a regular basis. He was once asked why he liked to dress so nice every day, his response, "You never know if you're going to meet the love of your life today, I want to make a good first impression."

We were jumping over the waves, Sace called it moon bouncing because it was like having low-gravity when you jumped high with the help of the wave. We kept jumping, adventuring further out while the others turned back to shore. Before we knew it, the waves size increased to about six feet high. Sace got a little ahead of me. After a we jumped over a big wave, I heard him call out for help. I knew immediately he was serious. I swam towards him and then I felt it. The water pulled me almost right to him. I didn't know it at the time, but we got caught in a rip current. As I met him, he said, "I can't do it, I'm so tired Joseph". I felt his body was weak, he was barely keeping his head above water, and I knew why he was so weak.

Sace stayed up two nights in a row before coming on this art trip. He was going through the emotions of his first break-up. When I grabbed him, I put my arm around his chest and held him against me and tried to swim him back to shore, but we didn't move any closer and I was getting exhausted trying to swim for both of us. When a wave came over our heads and pushed

us beneath the surface Sace panicked and pushed me down trying to stay above the water. I felt my lungs burn as I pushed him off of me. We looked at each other and we knew we were in danger, he knew there was nothing I could do to save him – we were both exhausted.

We screamed at the shore “HELP!” but no one noticed us, they weren’t aware of our situation. An immature eagle flew overhead, and I found peace. It was sign from the spirits, the message somehow calmed my soul, I knew we were going to be okay. I knew we still needed help, so I started to swim to shore. I swam for us. It was the hardest fight of my life for about five feet, and then suddenly a wave came from behind and carried me almost all the way to shore.

My lungs burned and my limbs grew shaky, and tight, as I was walking out of the water. I desperately called for help and pleaded, “everyone needs to get out of the water.” Then someone had said they couldn’t see Sace anymore, I looked frantically and then he appeared behind a wave. He was floating face to the sky. I saw him take his last breath as his body sank below the surface one last time. My legs stop shaking, I felt his spirit leave, and I felt that same sense of peace when the eagle flew overhead. Moments later I lost it completely, I don’t really remember what happened after that. To this day I can still hear his hoarse voice cry for help. I can still feel a pain where his back rested on my chest when I held him in my arm for the last time.

I felt like it wasn’t fair that I was alive, and he wasn’t. It is my belief that I can’t be arrogant enough to know, or assume, why the water spirits took him home and not me. People have said, it was his time and he was needed back in the spirit world. Only the spirits know why he was needed back in the spirit world. I was stricken with grief and full of selfishness after my friend drowned. I questioned a lot of what happened, I questioned the spirits and myself. I had wished I drowned with him. I held on to some arrogance that I could have saved him somehow

and pulled him to shore, or that I could have prevented him from entering the water that day. It was self-hate leading me to these thoughts. I wasn't thankful for the gift of life that I was given and the experiences I was able to share with my friend. I had to come to terms with the fact that he was needed back in the spirit world and that there was nothing more I could have done.

Accepting that he was never coming back was perhaps one the most difficult things in my life. I told Sace "*gigawaabamin*" or "see you again" because in the Ojibwe language there isn't a word for "good bye". We know we will see our relatives again, in this life or the next. I find comfort in being able to follow his tracks one day and meet my friend again.